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Stroke

A stroke occurs when the blood supply to part of the brain is suddenly interrupted or when a blood vessel in the brain bursts, spilling blood into the spaces surrounding brain cells. Brain cells die when they no longer receive oxygen and nutrients from the blood or there is sudden bleeding into or around the brain. The dying brain cells cause physical and mental impairments in stroke victims, some of which can be successfully treated with rehabilitation and therapy.

Approximately 700,000 people have strokes every year in the United States. There are over four million people currently living with the physical and mental effects of a past stroke influencing their lives. Below is information on this common and dangerous medical condition.

Types of Strokes

There are two kinds of stroke. The most common kind of stroke, called ischemic stroke, is caused by a blood clot that blocks or plugs a blood vessel in the brain. About 80 percent of all strokes are ischemic.

The second kind of stroke is called a hemorrhagic stroke. They are caused by a blood vessel that breaks and bleeds into the brain. About 20 percent of strokes are hemorrhagic.

When either type of stroke occurs, brain cells in the immediate area begin to die because they no longer are receiving the oxygen and nutrients they need to function.

Stroke damage in the brain can affect the entire body, resulting in mild to severe disabilities. These include paralysis, problems with thinking, problems with speaking and emotional difficulties.

Symptoms and Signs

The signs that somebody is having a stroke can include the following:

- Numbness or weakness in face, arm and leg muscles, often on just one side of the body

- Sudden confusion
- Trouble speaking or understanding speech
- Sudden trouble seeing in one or both eyes
- Sudden trouble with walking, dizziness, or loss of balance or coordination
- Sudden severe headache with no known cause

Because stroke injures the brain, people are often not able to correctly perceive their own problems. To a bystander, the stroke patient may seem unaware or confused. A stroke victim's best chance is if someone around her recognizes the stroke and acts quickly to help them.

Effects of a Stroke

While a stroke is essentially a brain condition, it can influence and impair many body parts and bodily functions. The potential physical and mental effects a stroke has on a person include:

- Weakness (hemiparesis) or paralysis (hemiplegia) on one side of the body that may affect the whole side or just the arm or leg. The weakness or paralysis is on the side of the body opposite the side of the brain affected by the stroke.
- Spasticity and stiffness in muscles or painful muscle spasms.
- Problems with balance, coordination or motor skills.
- Problems using language, including having difficulty understanding speech or writing (aphasia).
- Knowing the right words but having trouble saying them clearly (dysarthria).
- Being unaware of or ignoring sensations on one side of the body (bodily neglect or inattention).
- Pain, numbness and odd sensations.
- Problems with memory, thinking, attention or learning.
- Trouble swallowing (dysphagia).
- Bowel or bladder control problems.
- Problems performing everyday tasks.
- Fatigue.

- Problems controlling emotions.
- Depression.

If Somebody is Having a Stroke

New treatments are available that greatly reduce the damage caused by a stroke. But the patient needs to arrive at the hospital within 60 minutes after symptoms start to prevent increased disability. Knowing stroke symptoms, calling 911 immediately and getting the patient to a hospital are critical.

Because stroke injures the brain, you may not realize that you are having a stroke. The people around you might not know it either. Your family, friends or neighbors may think you are confused. You may not be able to call 911 on your own. This is why everyone should know the signs of stroke, and know to act fast when somebody is having one.

Call 911 immediately if you believe you are having a stroke, or get somebody to call for you if you are incapable of doing it. Making the decision to call for medical help can be the difference in avoiding a lifelong disability or death.

Bystanders should act quickly if they believe someone is having a stroke. They should call 911 immediately if they observe somebody who has lost the ability to speak, or to move an arm or leg on one side of their body or who is experiencing facial paralysis on one side of their body. Stroke is a medical emergency. Immediate treatment may save someone's life and enhance his or her chances for successful rehabilitation and recovery.

Stroke Prevention

Family history has been shown to play a role in determining who is at risk for stroke, but there are also things you can do to decrease your chances of having one. Here are some things you can do to help prevent stroke:

- Seek treatment for high blood pressure
- Maintain a balanced diet and healthy weight
- Exercise frequently
- Stop smoking cigarettes
- Try to lower your cholesterol level
- Seek treatment for diabetes and heart disease, two conditions that increase a person's vulnerability to stroke

Organizations

For more information about stroke and stroke prevention, contact:

- The American Stroke Association: A Division of American Heart Association at www.strokeassociation.org.
- The National Stroke Association at www.stroke.org.

Some content in this document was gathered from the Web site for the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, one of the National Institutes of Health. Their Web site is located at www.ninds.nih.gov.

Call us for the support that you need. 1-888-290-4EAP (TDD: 1800-697-0353) or go to www.GuidanceResources.com. Agency ID: FEDSOURCE

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